



COUNT DOWN TO KICK-OFF

FA Regional Coach Development Manager (5-11), Ian Bateman, offers advice for working effectively with junior teams on match day

Be mindful not to overload the players with information, instead use a choice word or a reminder

Match day often brings the best and worst out of football coaches. Games provide coaches the opportunity to support and encourage their players with aspects of the game they have worked on in training. Unfortunately, however, the emotions of the game can transform the most collected of individuals into red-faced touchline stompers.

Match day should be just another part of a player's learning journey; an opportunity to link the training and games programme, with players testing, experimenting and trying new skills, strategies and tactics. Match day shouldn't be seen as a one-off event detached from other aspects of player learning.

FA National Coach, John Allpress, stressed these very principles in his Match day preparation article (FA Insight journal, Autumn 2010). Similarly, The FA's Leadership Through Football award provides a number of excellent examples linking match day to The FA Four Corner Model. The following article hopes to provide some more ideas for coaches to add to their match day tool-box.

Managing the game

Night before:

The night before the game can be used for planning and preparation and is a good opportunity to take away some of the tasks faced on game day.

As you will have a good idea as to which players are available for the game, the playing rota can be decided, ensuring pitch-time is shared and the players play in a variety of different positions (see Pete Sturgess, at the grassroots, page 50).

45

minutes before kick off
-player's arrive:

When the players arrive they should be given the opportunity to socialise with their teammates. This is an important time for them to catch-up with their friends. The players are given one ball between them and this may turn into a "kicking in" session around one of the goals; it is important to remember that this is the players' time and is an informal start to match day. This can be a great time to assess the mood of the players: are they focussed and calm or are they excited and giddy.

This is also a good time to ask the players about life away from football. Try to find out about their other sporting pursuits or activities. This helps build a relationship between the coach and the group. A young player will recognise that you are interested in them as a person and not just as a footballer. It will also help the coach understand any issues that may affect performance on football match day.

This is also a good opportunity for the coach to have an informal chat with the parents. Ask the parents about how they feel their child is playing, what were their thoughts on the last game, or even, how did their child get on at the swimming gala. Sometimes we find that the players have very busy lives and football match day is only a small part of their activity calendar.

60

minutes before kick off
-equipment and
organisation:

Arrive at the venue and ensure all equipment for the game is in place. This time is used for laying the kit out in the changing room and organising the pitch area (goals, technical areas, respect banners).

Parents should be delegated tasks to share the responsibility of running the team and many parents will find a role that is suitable to them.

30

minutes before kick off

The coach and the players get together to re-cap the team focus from recent training and matches. This may involve reflecting on the successes or improvement areas identified in the last game. Although the coach will guide this conversation it is important that the players input their own thoughts. Focusing on positive areas is an effective approach. A player's level of understanding is often quite deep even at a young age. Be sure to get the views of some of the quieter players, since they may have some key information to offer.

Playing positions are communicated and the player's find out when they will be getting pitch time. This is done in front of the parents and also displayed in writing using the tactics board/ or on hand-outs. Everybody knows the plan before the game starts. A summary sheet can be used so that key messages are kept together and this will provide an excellent point of reference at half time.

The players are then handed individual position cards reminding them of their roles and responsibilities both in, and out, of possession.



Positional cards

The team is set out in a 4-2-2-2 formation (see diagram)

Goalkeeper

Position No 1

In Possession

- Throw the ball quickly to wide players, look to switch the play
- Support the CBs and be prepared to receive the ball
- Be aware of CM players arriving late at goal kicks

Out of possession

- Dominate the six yard box
- Provide information to defenders
- Be a 'sweeper' keeper

Wide players

Position No 2 & 3

In Possession

- Join in and support the attack when play is on your side.
- Can you overlap and get beyond the player in possession.
- Anticipate the CM switching the play

Out of possession

- Provide cover and support to the centre backs when play is on the opposite side of the pitch.
- Defend assertively.
- Apply pressure on the ball if 1st defender

Centre back

Position no 4 & 5

In possession

- Split to the corners of the penalty box when the GK has the ball
- Drop off at throw in's and create space for the CM's. Be prepared to receive the ball
- Drive into midfield if there is space

Out of possession

- Match up 1 v 1 with the central attackers
- Dominate your opponent
- Make sure WP tucks round and supports
- "Defend like dogs!"

High Strikers

Position No 7 & 11

In Possession

- Be direct and use your pace
- Rotate position with other strikers
- Play on the defenders shoulder
- Make angled runs

Out of possession

- Split defenders at goal kicks and throws
- Get behind the ball and make opponents play long
- Know when to pressurise

Controlling Midfielders

Position No 6 & 8

In Possession

- Look to receive from GK, arrive late
- Look to receive at throw ins and switch play
- Support attacks often behind the wide players

Out of possession

- Get between the ball and our goal, ideally with your back to our goal
- Apply pressure on the ball within 25 yards of our goal, stop shots
- Drop in for wide players and centre backs

Second Strikers

Position No 9 & 10

In Possession

- Get in between the opposition's defence and midfield
- Try to receive and play forward
- Go beyond the high strikers
- Make angled runs

Out of possession

- Overload areas at goal kicks and throws
- Get behind the ball and make opponents play long
- Win the ball back quickly if you lose possession

The detail on the positional cards are presented here as an example. The detail of the card would change from week to week and is dependent on many factors which are individual to the player and team. Initially, younger players may focus on one point in possession and one point out of possession.

The concise prompts and cues trigger the players to recall previous experiences in which they have practised, experimented, succeeded, or failed, with these aspects of the game. The coach can offer reassurances, reminders and encouragement specific to the detail on the cards.

In the same way, the prompts on the cards should direct the feedback and discussion that follows over the course of the game. Catching the players doing any of these parts of the game well should be highlighted and reinforced whenever possible.

25

minutes before kick off

“During the warm-up, there are lots of opportunities to reemphasise individual and collective goals, targets and roles and responsibilities”

Players go through a dynamic warm-up and finish with some static stretches. The ownership of the warm-up is given to the players and they set up and lead the activities. Getting the players to this stage does, however, take some time. The coach should facilitate the warm-up in the first few weeks, stressing its importance, and ensuring correct technique is followed. Over the following weeks the players should be given more responsibility, eventually leading the activity themselves. Give an individual, or a group of players, the responsibility of conducting the warm-up.

Goalkeepers undergo a specific warm-up, which can be facilitated by a coach or a parent. This will allow them lots of opportunity to repeat handling and distribution activities which allow them to gain confidence and a feel for the ball. This may be the most intense period of activity for the goalkeeper during the event of the match day.

During the warm-up, there are lots of opportunities to reemphasise individual and collective goals, targets and roles and responsibilities. Be mindful not to overload the players with information, instead use a choice word or a reminder.

15

minutes before kick off

The players take part in a keep ball session (to start with the numbers would favour one team. Swap the overload appropriately), the players are encouraged to develop their own rules, and the game may have direction (playing to end zones/target players). By the end of this short session the players should be playing to an intensity which is higher than the game. In the final part of the practice the numbers on each side will be equal (6v6/7v7) and will take place in a tight playing area.

During short drinks/stretching breaks, the players get into pairs and are encouraged to discuss the previous game, picking up clues and cues from each other.

5

minutes before kick off

“Playing positions are communicated in front of the parents. Everybody knows the plan before the game starts”

The coach prompts the players to set three ‘team targets’ for the match: one tactical target for play whilst in possession, one tactical target for play whilst out of possession and one other from the psychological or physical corners. The players then hydrate and prepare for kick-off. Team targets will relate to recent games. Examples may include:

- making sure that we always apply pressure around the edge of the box to stop shots
- try to see how many times we can play out from the keeper and still be in possession as we cross the half way line
- try to encourage each other during the game



Ian Bateman



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Ian has spent over 20 years working as a professional coach at all levels of youth football, serving his ‘apprenticeship’ with the Bobby Charlton and Manchester United Soccer Schools before joining Bolton Wanderers FC as Assistant Academy Manager.

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Kick off and the first-half

The feedback and reminders from the touchline are all focused on the individual positional responsibilities and the individual and collective goals. This will help the players focus and link their learning to pre-agreed goals.

There should be lots of positive reinforcement, highlighting the action the player has performed well. This should be supported with open questions to identify what the players understand.

Here, it must be stressed, that the coach should not provide a running commentary from the touchline. The players will simply switch off. The art of touchline coaching consists of focused observation, patience, and clear and concise communication. Choose appropriate times to offer feedback and information. This may be when the ball is out of play or the when the game takes its natural break.

Half-time

However the first half has gone the coach should refer back to the three team targets outlined at the beginning of the game. Controlling emotions - your own and that of the players - is an important part of creating an effective learning environment. Therefore, a few minutes of silence to begin the half-time break, can prove beneficial.

The players should be asked to reflect on the 3 team targets. They may rank themselves out of 10, as individuals, or as a group, or both. Where possible choose team targets that can be measured, for example:

- how many times did we get shots on target
- how many times did we regain possession in the opponents half

One of the parents can be tasked with collating the stats, giving them a focus during the game.

If there are some necessary areas of improvement, the players should be asked to find a solution to any problems. This process will need support, via questioning, from the coach and quite often technical detail. The results of these discussions may provide an opportunity to reset the team or individual targets depending on how the first half has gone.

Where possible the team-talk should be done in front of the parents. This will help those watching understand what the team is trying to achieve.

Second half and full-time

Continue with concise and timely reminders, questions and positive reinforcement where appropriate.

After the game, the coach should highlight and stress two positive aspects of the performance. This may be a technical or tactical success, likewise it may be to praise effort, commitment or teamwork.

Very little is said after the game, with the focus instead on how the players will review the game before the next training session or game.

The players will undergo a short cool down incorporating a series of dynamic and static stretches. Fluid is taken on board and the players are encouraged to eat as soon as possible.

As the players get changed, there is the opportunity to tie-up any loose ends with the parents, and give details of the forthcoming training sessions or game.

Post game

Following the game, contact is made with the players/ parents via email. Each player is sent a mini-report highlighting one key development area relating to the positional specific tasks or the team tasks. This may be as simple as a line or two of positive reinforcement. It is important to make the feedback individual, commenting on specific aspects of performance and linking any feedback into goals and challenges for the next game.

The above information is based on a traditional 11v11 game, with the game played over two halves. The same approach, however, can be conducted for different formats of the game.

Summary

Effective coaching sessions are founded on preparation and planning and matchday should be no different. In what quite often proves to be a highly-charged and emotional event, having an outline of activities, questions and timescales is beneficial and may just help you keep your head, whilst others around you lose theirs.

Match day should be just another part of a player's learning journey; an opportunity to link the training and games programme, with players testing, experimenting and trying new skills, strategies and tactics.

Countdown to kick-off, reminders:

The night before: Prepare playing rota, substitutions and playing formations

60 minutes before:
Organise all kit and equipment

45 minutes before: Players are given time to socialise with their teammates.
Coach can talk with parents

30 minutes before: Re-cap the team focus from recent training and matches.
The playing rota and positions are communicated. Roles and responsibility cards are distributed.

25 minutes before: Players go through a dynamic warm-up and finish with some static stretches.

15 minutes before: Keep- ball session. During short drinks breaks, the players get into pairs and discuss the previous game, picking up ideas from each other.

5 minutes before: Players set three 'team targets' for the match: in possession, out of possession and one other

First half: Touchline feedback and reminders should focus on the individual positional responsibilities and team goals. Use lots of positive reinforcement, highlighting the action the player has done well.

Half-time: Refer back to the three team targets outlined at the beginning of the game. Reset the targets if necessary.

Second half and post- game: Highlight and stress two positive aspects of the performance. An email highlighting one key development area may be sent. Players encouraged to individually review their performance ahead of the next session or game.